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**Visual Poetics:** Art and the Word

STÉPHANE MALLARMÉ  
ANDRÉ MASSON  
ENZO MIGLIETTA  
RICHARD MINSKY  
RIVANE NEUENSCHWANDER  
JORGE PANTOJA  
TIBOR PAPP  
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RUBÉN TORRES-LLORCA  
CARRIE MAE WEEMS  
CHRISTOPHER WOOL

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*I would prefer that one did not read this Note, or if skimmed, that one would forget it; it informs the skillful reader of little lying outside his own perception...*

–Stéphane Mallarmé

Preface to *Un Coup de dés* (1897) translated by Brian Coffey

## TO BEGIN

Just as language is poetic when it captures a moment without exactly telling a story, we can speak of poetry in art that evokes an emotion or idea with the sweep of a line or a radiant passage of light. There is a special kind of poetry that comes when image and word are combined; for example, the enigma of Magritte's painted pipe which he labeled "Ceci n'est pas un pipe (This is not a pipe)."

In *Visual Poetics: Art and the Word*, language is fused with image and image is clothed with words. The artists in the exhibition use a wide range of media – painting, sculpture, photography, drawing, printmaking, artists' books, and video – in which they pair text with image, employ words as compositional devices, or make language the image itself. *Visual Poetics* contains works of historical significance from the end of the nineteenth century as well as contemporary offerings, and its ideas span the political, the poetic, and the purely formal.

This exhibition features selections from Miami Art Museum's permanent holdings and works from private collections, including the Ruth and Marvin Sackner Archive of Concrete and Visual Poetry. Concrete poetry was an offspring of the concrete art movement, begun in 1930 in Paris, which sought to distinguish abstraction based on the purely formal properties of art – color, form, volume, and contour – from abstraction of forms found in nature. Concrete poetry exhibits a distinctive shape, formal arrangement, or obvious manipulation of typography for expressive purposes.

Visual poetry, on the other hand, integrates image and language organically in a composition. There are examples of both concrete and visual poetry in the exhibition, along with other word-image hybrids like typewriter art and micrography (miniature writing). While the fifty-six works in *Visual Poetics* explore three main themes – language as form, language and politics, and language that imbues a work with psychological content – the world of text-based art can never be strictly categorized.

## EVOLUTION OF CHANCE

The term "concrete poetry" emerged in 1953 in Sweden and Switzerland, and shortly thereafter in Brazil, but most critics consider the first modern concrete poem to be Stéphane Mallarmé's *Un Coup de dés jamais n'abolira le hasard* (A Throw of the Dice Never Will Abolish Chance), published in 1897.

Mallarmé (1842-98) was one of the most significant intellectuals of nineteenth-century France, a Symbolist poet who elevated intuition, chance, and the suggestive magic of words to the highest level.

The visual presentation of *Un Coup de dés* is integral to its meaning. Mallarmé used type of different sizes and styles and left areas of each page blank in order to vary the poem's visual and aural impact. He placed words carefully on the page, treating them like objects in space or notes on a sheet of music. He was interested in how the physical form of a poem might reflect the work's ideas and sentiments.

*Un Coup de dés* refers to acts of chance in the face of the absolute – that is to say, death – and humankind's perplexing role in the universe. The language is elusive and the imagery airy, lending the poem numerous interpretations. The work's pages each form an ideogram – a sinking ship, constellations, cresting waves; sometimes all three and more. For Mallarmé – and the avant-garde artists who came after him, like Marcel Duchamp and the Surrealists – the act of creation was not complete until the viewer had brought his or her own interpretation to the work of art.

Mallarmé's poem is the cornerstone of the Sackner Archive and it is a focal point of *Visual Poetics*, along with contemporary objects inspired by the work. *Un Coup de dés* is widely regarded as the predecessor of early twentieth-century experiments in language and image by poet Guillaume Apollinaire, the Dadaists, the Surrealists, and the Italian Futurists. A number of works in the exhibition relate to *Un Coup de dés* through their form, intentions, or subject matter.

## HOMAGES

Mallarmé approved two versions of *Un Coup de dés* for publication – one from 1897 and one published posthumously in 1914. In 1969, the Belgian artist Marcel Broodthaers appropriated the 1914 version, obliterating the words while leaving the shapes of the lines intact by means of horizontal black bars. Broodthaers' *Image* reduces *Un Coup de dés* to its most basic shape, emphasizing both the beauty of the poem's physical structure and Mallarmé's fetishistic way of working. Broodthaers' use of translucent paper creates a depth wherein the constellation Mallarmé refers to at the end of his poem is now the poem itself.

André Masson's 1961 homage to *Un Coup de dés* celebrates the poem's vitality and dynamic rhythms. The expressive energy that habitually infuses Masson's surreal paintings and drawings is in evidence here. Whereas Mallarmé emphasizes typography, Masson uses hand-written lines exploding with gesture and color. Mallarmé utilizes white space – and its implied silence – to suggest doubt, negation, and indeterminacy. Masson fills the page with calligraphic lines and feathery passages of color that speak of movement and becoming.

Françoise Mairey's 1999 tribute to *Un Coup de dés*, like Masson's, differs radically from Mallarmé's original – it is compact, repetitive, and grid-like. She repeatedly typed each line of the poem until she created three-by-two-and-a-half-inch blocks of words, one block – or line – to a sheet of paper. Mairey recorded the date and place of her work at the bottom of each sheet, and she also noted the number of mistakes she made (both "evident" and "non-evident"), acknowledging the element of chance that caused her to hit the wrong key.

## LANGUAGE AS FORM

In Mallarmé's poem *Un Coup de dés*, language becomes form through variations of type and the placement of words on a page. Similarly, in Carl Andre's poems from 1965 and Enzo Miglietta's ideogram *Il Respiro Corto (Shortness of Breath)* from 1990, the overall design of the page is evident even before the reader absorbs the words' meanings. In both artists' works, text has a topography and a visual rhythm. For Andre, the rigorous formal structure of his typed poems relates directly to his own three-dimensional works. He incorporates common words as compositional modules, much like his signature use of bricks or thin metal squares placed end to end in his sculpture. The overall shapes of words on the page recall his geometric wooden constructions. Miglietta's microscopic text has an angular form, and, in keeping with the work's title, suggests a respirator's digital readout.

In *Die of Pleasure* (1998), Bruce Pearson sculpted the three words of the title out of Styrofoam. The artist greatly distorted the letters, however, and it is almost impossible to make out the words through their spiraling repetitions. *Die of Pleasure*, from the artist's *Spirituality Today* series, is Pearson's ironic reflection on the contemporary search for fulfillment through alternative religions, cults, and natural spirituality. The mandala-like composition of the work and its various shades of white go along with spiritual ascension and enlightenment. *Die of Pleasure* recalls Op Art and the psychedelic designs of the 1960s. It could also be seen as a tongue-in-cheek metaphor for art as a transcendent, almost religious, experience.

Michel Majerus' large painting *Splash Bombs* (2002) uses logo-like words as dynamic forms in an abstract field of citrus colors. "Splash Bombs" refers both to swimming pool toys and the way the paint covers the canvas, in bursts of color applied with broad brush strokes and drips. Majerus' painterly gestures echo the style of famous abstract expressionist Willem de Kooning. With his numerous references, the artist seems to be commenting on the vigor of painting, the power of the banal in art, and the leveling of the values of contemporary culture.

## THE POLITICS OF LANGUAGE

Mallarmé challenged his readers to see words and images differently, to question assumptions about what these things add up to and to arrive at new, more expansive conclusions about language and its use. Likewise, *Visual Poetics* features works that attempt to engage the viewer and challenge usual thinking about race, politics, and power. In Glenn Ligon's *Untitled (The Blackness Cannot Be Separated From Me But Often I Can Stand Outside It)*, language, personal identity, and social conventions converge. This painting comes from a series Ligon began in 1990, in which he used quotations from black writers who explore the complexities of race. There is a striking tension in the painting between the meaning of the words and the work's overall form. As Ligon stenciled the text from top to bottom, the words became progressively smudged and illegible. Perhaps the artist means to say that statements – of belief, of fact – become less easily understood the more they are repeated.

For Jenny Holzer, who also uses language as image, "art is an instrument of social transformation." In the late 1970s Holzer began writing her now famous "truisms," statements which, like old sayings, at least sound true. These pronouncements, such as "A strong sense of duty imprisons you," are stated with attention-grabbing authority, and the reader feels obliged to agree or disagree with them. The artist conveys her truisms by means of objects like light-emitting diode (LED) signs and marble benches. These "alternative public service messages," as she calls them, have a disarming simplicity, but they speak eloquently of desperation and alienation, conditions brought on by the fear, panic, and withdrawal engendered by modern life.

## LANGUAGE, DESIRE AND MEMORY

*Visual Poetics* also explores how language instills artworks with psychological content. Mallarmé begins *Un Coup de dés* with a description of a shipwreck in a yawning abyss, and Ed Ruscha's *Hollow Triumph* (1990) depicts an anchor with the title words seemingly afloat in front of it. "Hollow Triumph," especially in this ghostly form, seems to cast doubt on the righteousness of victory.

In *1836-1936-1984* and *Es sólo agua en la lágrima de un extraño (It's Only Water in the Teardrop of a Stranger)*, Rogelio López Marín (Gory) pairs his mirage-like photographs from 1986 with poems by his wife, Lucía Ballester, and excerpts from the novel *Mirror in the Mirror*, by German writer Michael Ende. Like Ruscha's painting, Gory's subtly hand-tinted images obliquely refer to memory and loss. They also suggest the suppression of individuality and a precarious sense of place. In these montaged photographs, Gory places ordinary objects in surreal proximities and uses text to infuse his compositions with both personal expression and collective understanding.

Raymond Pettibon likes to write on his drawings; or rather, he likes to add drawings to original texts. Taken together, image and text have a relationship which may at first seem hidden or, at best, oblique, but which gradually becomes satisfying, at least poetically. The texts are sometimes the

artist's own words and sometimes those of other writers, like Henry James, Marcel Proust, or John Ruskin. Regardless, the autonomous linguistic fragments are always urgent, eloquent, and suggestive. Even a simple sketch, like a teakettle, becomes deeply resonant when coupled with these shrewd evocations. Pettibon's works seem to inhabit the realm of thought and the external world all at once, and they are haunted by a sense of impending loss.

In Rivane Neuenschwander's video, *Love Lettering* (2002), words glide through water in much the way that words float on the page in Mallarmé's poem, *Un Coup de dés*. *Love Lettering* explores the intersection of language, desire, and chance. The words attached to the tails of the goldfish are from an e-mail which was essentially a love letter. Neuenschwander seems to say that swimming fish better embody the randomness and ephemerality of human relationships than do the orderly, predictable messages delivered by technology.

Rubén Torres-Llorca and Liliana Porter present visual and verbal propositions that seem especially susceptible to viewers' associations. In Torres-Llorca's *There is Some Order in My Life*

(2003), photographs of shoes, a stack of books, a lamp, and other banal objects are paired with words associated with "order," such as "divisions," "sequences," and "rankings." But many of the pairings appear to be obscure or pointless, and the viewer must make up an association in order to fulfill the artist's plaintive insistence – "there is some order in my life." This may reflect Torres-Llorca's belief that the hierarchies in our lives are arbitrary but necessary to maintain a sense of well-being.

Porter's *Gaze*, created for this exhibition, consists of fourteen small works on ruled paper, each with a tiny drawn image or attached object – like a miniature figurine or a furry animal – and a few dramatic words, such as "the correction," "the truth," and "disguise." The point here seems to be the tension between childlike objects and adult themes, between small and consummately simple compositions and grand ideas. Porter's gift is to depict psychological truths with poetic precision, and to bring the sentimental and the cerebral alive.

Cheryl Hartup  
*Associate Curator*

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